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Openings and Closings in Workplace Emails: How Do People Navigate without Clear Standards and Clearly Prescribed Formulae?

Abstract

Languages vary when it comes to linguistic manifestations of formal politeness, but what particularly marks professional email communication is the flexibility of the genre compared to traditional, formal business letters. This poses the question of how individual email writers navigate without clear standards and clearly prescribed formulae. This study focuses on the individual email writer and, specifically, opening salutations and closing valedictions in 927 Norwegian workplace emails, followed by metapragmatic interviews with their senders. In an egalitarian society with few explicit linguistic manifestations of formal politeness, individual choices of formulations provide a rich source of data. Linguistic content analysis reveals a significant degree of consistency in each person's individual use, which indicates that when there are no commonly held norms, people make their own rules. The interviewees are aware of which openings and closings they prefer, but often not why. Further analysis of the data reveals that hierarchical social distance is not a motivational factor, but the intentions to be either personally close or professionally distant are. Both are regarded as viable options in formal workplace emails by their users. However, the informants' perception of which linguistic items represent these motivations depends on individual preferences rather than on any established or institutionalised practices. The latter is not a uniquely Norwegian problem, but concerns email correspondents in general because of the flexibility innate to the email genre.

Keywords

Professional email communication; opening salutation; closing valediction; individual style; egalitarianism

1. Introduction

This study focuses on openings¹ and closings² in professional email correspondence. Within pragmatics, the last decade has seen many studies of openings and closings in email correspondence between teachers and students (Bjørge 2007, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, Félix-Brasdefer 2012, Savić 2018). The earliest linguistic CMC (computer mediated communication) studies on email communication, however, examined emails written between workers in a professional setting (Crystal 2001, Baron 1998, 2002, Gains 1999, Giménez 2000, Murray 1991). With a small number of emails per sender, these studies focus on the corpus rather than on the individual. They are highly informative about the general use and nature of email greetings, but do not provide knowledge about the individual email correspondent's preferences for a certain language use or how conscious those preferences are.

Languages vary when it comes to linguistic manifestations of formal politeness (see, e.g., Hickey/Stewart (2005) on politeness in Europe). However, what particularly marks modern business-email communication is the flexibility of the genre compared to traditional, formal business letters (Darics 2015: 1). This poses the question of how individual email writers navigate without clear standards and clearly prescribed formulae. This is not a uniquely Norwegian problem. Nor-

1 In addition to the term *opening* (Gains 1999), studies on email communication use the terms *greeting* (Pérez Sabater et al. 2008; Bjørge 2007; Waldvogel 2007) or *salutation* (Gimenez, 2000; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005).

2 For closing emails, the terms *closing* (Gains 1999; Waldvogel 2007), farewells, *sign-off* (Pérez Sabater et al. 2008), or *closing valediction* (McKeown and Zhang 2015) are used in studies on email communication.

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wegian professional email communication, however, may be an extreme example because the Norwegian egalitarian social fabric means that there are few explicit, linguistic manifestations of formal politeness, not only in email messaging, but also in communication in general. Still, there are Norwegian workers who wonder how to distinguish an informal personal email from a workplace email, and, in the absence of normative rules, individual choices of formulations provide a rich source of data. This study examines opening salutations and closing valedictions in 927 Norwegian workplace emails, followed by metapragmatic interviews with its senders. With an average of 60 emails per informant, the present study sets out to examine what considerations, if any, individual email writers have when they choose their opening salutations and closing valedictions in professional emails.

2. Background

Even though technologies such as social networking, instant messaging (IM), chat, mobile IM etc. are taking hold, email is still the most pervasive form of business communication (The Radicati Group 2018: 2). Based on data from professional email communication, early studies (Murray 1991; Gains 1999; Baron 1998, 2002; Giménez 2000; Crystal 2001) set out to examine whether the email genre, in general, belonged to the spoken or the written genre. Not surprisingly, they found that it has traces of both. Similar to the spoken genre, emails have shorter and looser sentence constructions, more phrasal repetitions, and more colloquial grammar and vocabulary than in the written genre (Crystal 2001: 43). Emails tend to use active rather than passive verb forms (Giménez, 2000), and their pronoun use is more in line with a spoken style (Collot/Belmore 1996). Even body language cues in spoken communication are simulated by incorporating emoticons in email communication (Skovholt et al. 2014). Even though Giménez (2000: 242) describes commercial emails as more “informal and personalised” than traditional business letters, they also have traces of formality which will be less common in private emails. Bondi (2005) studies genre variation in workplace emails and especially the alternation between what she terms personal and professional identities. Although the borderline between personal identity and professional/corporate identity is often fuzzy, she finds that sharing personal information and emotional language are typical examples of personalization used for rapport building purposes in professional emails. However, since professional emails are often written on behalf of the company or the organization, Gains (1999) found that formal workplace emails tend to have many passive constructions that depersonalise the writer’s responsibility or make the message more ‘official’. Gains (1999) explains this to be a result of emails being viewed as permanent legal records rather than an impermanent medium created only for social purposes. In addition to the preference for passive voice over active voice, depersonalisation is characterized by nominalization (e.g. “the approval of [...]” instead of “[somebody] approves”), general rules (e.g. “company rules require [...]” instead of “[I/we] require”), and the (inclusive) first-person plural ‘we’ (Fløttum et al. 2006). In addition, workplace language may contain “stilted” corporate (or legal/bureaucratic) language popularly called *officialese* (Longe 1985: 306).

Within linguistic research, greetings are among the most formulaic and ritualised forms of politeness (Watts 2003) and represent a typical structural element of politeness in emails (Bunz/Campbell 2004). McKeown and Zhang (2015) found that closing phrases were a direct reflection of the overall politeness markers in the email. Other studies that investigate emails written by native speakers of English (Baron 1998; Crystal 2001; Waldvogel 2002; Scheyder 2003; Lancaster 2010) have found opening and closing devices to be frequently absent from professional email interactions, but without suggesting that such emails are impolite.

Several socio-pragmatic factors have been found to have an effect on one’s choice of opening salutations and closing valedictions. These are line of work and the environment at the workplace (Gains 1999; Waldvogel 2007; Ly 2016), whether the email is part of a dialogue or merely providing information (Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005; Kankaanranta 2006), the email’s linguistic context (whether it initiates a contact/topic or is part of an ongoing communication), time

elapsed since the previous email, length of the email, whether it is sent to one or several participants (McKeown/Zhang 2015; Pérez Sabater et al. 2008), and the relationship between the correspondents, especially with respect to status and social distance (Sherblom 1988; Bou-Franch 2011; McKeown/Zhang 2015). While McKeown and Zhang (2015) argue that the social distance between the correspondents triggers formal greetings and sign-offs, Waldvogel (2007) found that the relative status of the interlocutors had little effect on the formality of greetings in New Zealand because the workplace culture is marked by egalitarianism. Waldvogel (2007) compares emails from two companies in New Zealand and finds that even though there is a tendency for fewer greetings downwards than upwards in both companies examined, a more influential factor is the different organizational cultures of the two workplaces. One may expect that individual email writers vary their opening salutations and closing valedictions depending on these socio-pragmatic concerns, but because the studies above are focused on the corpus rather than on individuals' motivations, we do not exactly know what considerations each email writer makes.

As pointed out above, the language of professional email communication may be a matter of the email writer's conscious and strategic choices. McKeown/Zhang (2015) use quantitative regression analysis to examine the variation of (in)formality in opening salutations and closing valedictions in a corpus of 387 emails written by 53 informants in two British companies. They found that the correlation between a person's previous and current email sign-off could not be explained by any of the variables above such as time elapsed since the previous email, length of the email, whether it is sent to one or several participants, or the relationship between the correspondents. They speculated whether it could be just an unconscious habit without any strategic intent. The researchers invite qualitative research into the motivations for choice of opening and closing formulae to explore such issues further.

Based on the discussion above, this study has three specific research questions:

- RQ1 How much variation is there in the informants' use of openings and closings?
- RQ2 Are the openings and closings that they use conscious or unconscious choices?
- RQ3 If their choices are conscious, what motivational factors are they guided by?

This section has addressed the general lack of normative rules in email correspondence. For anyone writing in Norwegian, the lack of norms is further complicated by the fact that linguistic formality in the society as a whole has diminished since the 1970s. This is addressed next.

3. The Norwegian Context

Norwegian egalitarianism finds its root in the nineteenth century liberal principles concerning citizens' rights and the abolition of nobility (Myhre 2018). According to Eriksen (1993: 8), Norwegian 'egalitarian individualism' expresses itself through a strong rejection of formal social hierarchies. Thus, egalitarianism at Norwegian workplaces manifests itself in a management style where leaders downplay their authority (Smith et al. 2003). Linguistically, polite address forms such as *Vous* (French) or *Sie* (German), which are often used to exemplify formal politeness in European languages (Kádár/Haugh 2013: 26), were never part of Norwegian folk culture (Haugen 1978). As a result of young people rejecting the elite culture in the 1970s, the Norwegian V(ous)-form *De* disappeared from urban cultures too (Haugen, 1978). Today, there are few linguistic manifestations of formal politeness in modern Norwegian (Fretheim 2005).

Yli-Vakkuri (2005) argues that the same transitional period affected greeting rituals across Scandinavia. Rygg (2017), in examining the changes in spoken Norwegian greeting rituals over the past hundred years, finds that short, informal and multifunctional greetings have, by and large, replaced older greetings restricted to specific situations, tasks, or time of day such as *signe arbeidet* [bless the work] (said when passing someone working) or *god dag* [(wish you a) good day]. By examining questionnaire data from Norwegians born before 1960, this research shows that the

participants do not miss the formal address form *De*, but a substantial number of the participants think that it is a pity that greetings have been reduced to informal ones such as *hei* ‘hi’, *heisann* ‘hi there’ and *hallo* ‘hello’. A study of an online corpus confirms that these are the most commonly used greetings in Norwegian emails and web forums today (Rygg 2017). However, in light of the above discussion, professional emails may have more traces of traditional written forms of communication than private emails.

The genre of an official letter (e.g. job applications or letters to a civil servant) that Norwegians learn to write at school is considered polite when it starts with the recipient’s full name and address at the top of the letter, followed by a heading, but no greeting. Contrary to official letters, the Norwegian Language Council, which is a government agency established to supervise and give public recommendations about Norwegian language use, suggests to start professional email correspondence with *Hei*, N [*hei* + comma + N (first name) or FN (full name)], and to end it with the formal closing formula (*med*) *vennlig hilsen* [(with) friendly greeting]. The opening *kjære* ‘dear’ with the closing *beste hilsen* [best greeting (from)] N [first name] they recommend for personal letters. Because it may be perceived as informal and even impolite, the agency advises against using the abbreviated forms of the formal closing formula *med vennlig hilsen* [with friendly greeting], which are *Vh.* or *Mvh.* The Language Council’s recommendations are only to be found on their web page and not in the school curricula, so the following analysis of workplace emails will show to what extent the recommendations above are followed, or even familiar to users.

4. Research Design and Analytical Framework

The present study analyses openings and closings in a dataset of 927 authentic workplace emails sent by fourteen administrative officers at a Norwegian business school over a five-year period (2015-2019). There are approximately 400 employees at the business school, 120 of whom belong to the administrative staff. The first 297 emails are from the author’s own email account, and are addressed to the author or with the author as a secondary recipient (cc). The senders of these emails were asked to forward the latest forty emails they had sent from their own account. In all, this amounted to 927 emails: 513 to internal recipients, i.e. administrative and academic staff at all levels, and 387 to external recipients, i.e. addressees who work outside the business school.

As displayed in Table 1 below, the fourteen informants, whose mother tongue is Norwegian, come from various parts of the administration such as Section for Exams, Unit for External Relations, Executive Training, and Office for Student and Academic Affairs. Due to the nature of their work tasks, some sent more external emails than others did. Their age varies from 32 to 55 years (born between 1962 and 1985), and their experience in administrative work varies from 3 to 28 years. There are studies that find gender differences in CMC communication (Herring 1996, 2003), but as the administrative officers in the current study were mostly female, the gender dimension is not being pursued here.

Name ³	Sex	Age	Year of Birth	Years of Admin. Work	Taught to Write Formal Letters	Title	Thinking of Self as 'Leader'	Num. of Emails
Gunn	F	50	1968	18	No	Head of Section	Yes	50
Janne	F	36	1981	9	No	Adviser	No	35
Julia	F	55	1962	18	No	Executive Officer	No	89
Kari	F	36	1981	10	No	Senior Executive Officer	No	77
Klara	F	32	1985	5	No	Higher Executive Officer	No	91
Line	F	32	1985	10	No	Adviser	No	82
Maren	F	36	1982	5	No	Senior Executive Officer	No	43
Marit	F	41	1976	15	No	Head of Section	Yes	96
Mona	F	50	1967	27	Yes	Administration Manager	No	48
Silje	F	51	1966	28	No	Senior Adviser	Yes	64
Siv	F	41	1976	3	No	Adviser	No	79
Sofie	F	49	1968	24	Yes	Head of Section	No	74
Tom	M	52	1965	16	No	Senior Adviser	No	68
Tora	F	45	1972	19	Yes	Head of Section	No	31

Table 1: An overview of the informants and the total number of emails.

Some of the informants had been taught, through formal education or by an earlier employer, how to write a formal letter, but none of them reported being trained in writing a formal email. Regardless of job title, some said that they thought of themselves to be in a leadership position when writing emails, while others did not, which may influence their style. Even though the informants were asked to forward the latest forty emails from their own account, some sent more, others less, hence, the difference in number of emails in Table 1.

Linguistic content analysis is a method of encoding textual data by categorizing key words and identifying the relationships among these words (Eltinge/Roberts 1993). The linguistic content analysis of the current emails started out by noting date and time of the email before registering the opening and the closing phrase, and then analysed the surrounding linguistic content of that particular opening and closing in order to try to understand whether it was used with a formal or an informal intent. Having analysed the emails, the informants were invited to an interview. Metapragmatic interviews were used because they provide information about the speakers' own perceptions and attitudes concerning their language use instead of leaving it to the researcher to decide (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 333). The interviews were semi-structured with some open questions (see interview guide attached to Appendix A). Each interview, lasting approximately 20 minutes, was recorded at the informant's office and subsequently transcribed. The informants were asked how they open and close an email, but not explicitly why, in order to see if they would volunteer an explanation. The aim of the interviews was to gauge the informants' level of awareness concerning the choice of email greetings and valedictions.

Informed consent was obtained from the fourteen interviewed staff members. The focus of this study is on the text produced by them, not by their interlocutors. For the sake of anonymity, the informants' names have been changed. Translations from Norwegian to English are mine, but have been proofread by a colleague with professional knowledge of both languages.

5. Results

Table 2 displays 29 opening varieties and their occurrences in the corpus.

³ All names are pseudonyms

Recorded occurrences	Openings	[Literal translation] and/or 'English translation'	Recommendations by the Norwegian Language Council
207	<i>Hei</i> , (with comma)	'Hi'	<i>Hei</i> , (comma) N (first) name or FN (full name) is recommended for professional emails <i>Hei</i> , (comma) N! (exclamation mark) is also recommended for professional emails
106	<i>Hei</i> (without comma)		
28	<i>Hei!</i> (with an excl. mark)		
234	<i>Hei</i> N, (with comma)		
41	<i>Hei</i> N (without comma)		
25	<i>Hei</i> N! (with excl. mark)		
56	<i>Hei</i> , (comma) N		
5	<i>Kjære</i> N, (with comma)	'Dear'	<i>Kjære</i> 'dear' is recommended for both professional emails and for personal letters
3	<i>Kjære</i> N (without comma)		
10	<i>Hei igjen</i> , (with comma)	'Hi again'	
1	<i>Hei igjen</i> (without comma)		
19	<i>Hei igjen!</i> (with excl. mark)		
3	<i>Hei dere</i> , (with comma)	[Hi you (2nd person plural)] 'hi all of you'	
1	<i>Hei dere</i> (without comma)		
1	<i>Hei dere</i> (with excl. mark)		
5	<i>Hei alle</i> , (with comma)	[Hi all] 'hi everyone'	
2	<i>Hei alle!</i> (with excl. mark)		
1	<i>Hei alle sammen</i> , (with comma)		
3	<i>Hei alle sammen!</i> (with excl. mark)		
6	<i>God morgen</i> , (with comma)	'Good morning'	
2	<i>God morgen</i> (without comma)		
5	<i>God morgen!</i> (with excl. mark)		
2	<i>God ettermiddag</i> ,	'Good afternoon'	
12	<i>Gode kolleger</i> ,	[Good colleagues]	
12	<i>Heisann</i>	'Hi there' (heisann is an informal variation of <i>hei</i> , borrowed from Swedish and became common in Norway as late as the 1970s and 80s (Rygg, 2017))	
1	<i>Hei og takk for sist!</i>	[Hi and thank you for last (time we met)]	
1	<i>Hei og takk for godt møte</i> ,	[Hi and thank you for (a) good meeting]	
6	N (first name alone)		
129	(no opening)		

Table 2: Openings and closings in the corpus.

In table 2, *hei* (+name) followed by a comma has the highest frequency of occurrence.

Table 3 displays 19 closing varieties and their occurrences in the corpus.

Recorded occurrences	Closings	[Literal translation] and/or 'English translation'	Recommendations by the Norwegian Language Council
3	<i>Med vennlig hilsen</i> N	[with friendly greeting] (from) N	<i>(med) vennlig hilsen</i> is appropriate for professional emails
77	<i>Med vennlig hilsen</i> + e-signature		
39	<i>Vennlig hilsen</i> N	[friendly greeting] (from) N	
47	<i>Vennlig hilsen</i> + e-signature		
143	<i>Mvh</i> N	abbreviation of <i>med vennlig hilsen</i>	<i>Mvh</i> is not recommended because it may be conceived as too informal
66	<i>Mvh</i> , N		
4	<i>Mvh</i> + e-signature		
119	<i>Hilsen</i> N	[greeting (from)] N	<i>Hilsen</i> may be used in professional emails
25	<i>Hilsen</i> , N		
1	<i>Hilsen fra</i> N		
89	<i>Beste hilsen</i> N	[best greeting] (from) N	<i>Beste hilsen</i> is recommended for personal letters
59	<i>Beste hilsen</i> + e-signature		
6	<i>Med beste hilsen</i> N	[with best greeting](from) N	
1	<i>Takk fra</i> N	[thank you from] N	
1	<i>Klem fra</i> N	Hug from N	
5	<i>God helg fra</i> N	(wish you) a good weekend [from N]	
159	N (first name alone)		
48	E-signature without a valediction		
35	No closing or e-signature		

Table 3: Closings in the corpus.

In table 3, we see that to sign off with the name alone has the highest frequency of occurrence.

However, if we look at the informants individually, we find that instead of following any commonly held norms, each person's use of openings, closings, and punctuation marks is a highly individual choice. Thus, if we look at Table 4, which displays the openings and closings that the informants use the most, we see that four of the informants (Tom, Silje, Julia, and Line) never end the opening salutation with a comma. Opening without a punctuation mark has high distributions for Tom, Julia, and Gunn, but is uncommon for the remaining participants. Silje, Kari, Janne and Siv add an exclamation mark to the greeting, the others never do. Further, *heisann* is an opening only used by Julia, Tom is the only one to open with the recipients' first name alone, and Mona is the only one to use *gode kolleger*.

Name	Interview Opening(s)	Content Analysis Opening(s)	Interview Closing(s)	Content Analysis Closing(s)
Gunn	«I use <i>hei</i> plus the name. I don't know which punctuation mark I use»	<i>Hei</i> (N) (no comma) (53%) <i>Hei</i> (N), (comma) (47%)	“ <i>med vennlig hilsen</i> plus automatic signature”	<i>Med vennlig hilsen</i> in e-signature (72%) <i>Mvh Gunn</i> (24%)
Janne	“I use <i>hei</i> + comma because it is the more formal or neutral choice”	<i>Hei</i> (N), (80%)	«I use <i>Beste hilsen</i> + e-signature»	<i>Beste hilsen</i> , in e-signature (28%) <i>Janne</i> (28%) Signature without closing (40%)
Julia	“ <i>Hei</i> and no punctuation mark. I used to use <i>heisann</i> but have stopped using it”	<i>Hei</i> (no comma) (64%) <i>Heisann</i> (14%)	“signature or just the name”	<i>Julia</i> (52%) <i>Med vennlig hilsen</i> in e-signature (46%)
Kari	“I use <i>hei</i> with comma. I seldom use someone's name”	<i>Hei</i> , (85%)	“I use <i>beste hilsen</i> or only <i>hilsen</i> ”	<i>Hilsen Kari</i> (25%) <i>Beste hilsen Kari</i> (20%) <i>Mvh Kari</i> /e-signature (25%)
Klara	« <i>Hei</i> + comma»	<i>Hei</i> (N), (85%)	“before I only used <i>mvh</i> . Now I use <i>beste hilsen</i> or <i>vennlig hilsen</i> ”	<i>Vennlig hilsen Klara</i> (43%) <i>Beste hilsen Klara</i> (38%) <i>Mvh Klara</i> (10%)
Line	“I use <i>hei</i> , comma, name, because that is what I learnt at school. It happens that I use an exclamation mark but then, no name”	<i>Hei</i> , (N) (57%) Greeting without name but with an exclamation mark (24%)	“I use <i>vennlig hilsen</i> full name and add an e-signature or <i>hilsen</i> because it is personal and the least formal + first name.”	<i>Hilsen Line</i> (38%) <i>Vennlig hilsen</i> in e-signature (28%) <i>Line</i> (25%)
Maren	“Usually <i>hei</i> with comma to signal that the sentence continues below”	<i>Hei</i> (N), (98%)	« <i>hilsen</i> to people I know well and <i>Mvh</i> to people I only communicate with via email”	<i>Hilsen Maren</i> (50%) <i>Mvh. Maren</i> (36%)
Marit	“I start with <i>hei</i> and comma”	<i>Hei</i> (N), (93%)	“Usually I use <i>mvh</i> with comma”	<i>Mvh, Marit</i> (98%)
Mona	«I use <i>hei</i> and comma [...]. <i>Gode kolleger</i> when I want to be warmer”	<i>Hei</i> (N), (56%) <i>Gode kolleger</i> , ‘good colleagues’ (31%)	« <i>mvh</i> and name»	<i>Mvh Mona</i> (58%) <i>Vennlig hilsen Mona</i> (21%)
Silje	“I add exclamation mark because it adds a positive atmosphere”	Greetings with exclamation mark (91%)	“I use <i>beste hilsen</i> ”	<i>Beste hilsen Silje</i> (98%)
Siv	“I add the name to <i>hei</i> because it is friendlier.”	First name added to greeting (53%)	“Before I thought <i>mvh</i> was superficial. Now I use it because it is quick and convenient”	<i>Mvh Siv</i> (46%) <i>Siv</i> (30%) <i>Hilsen Siv</i> (21%)
Sofie	“ <i>hei</i> + name”	<i>Hei</i> N, (94%)	“I use <i>hilsen</i> and often add a ‘nicety’ ⁴ ”	<i>Hilsen Sofie</i> (64%) 51% of emails have a ‘nicety’ before closing.
Tom	“ <i>Hei</i> without a punctuation mark is correct”	<i>Hei</i> (no comma) (56%) <i>Hei</i> , (N) (26%) <i>Amanda</i> (14%)	“For internal emails I end with <i>hilsen Tom</i> or just <i>Tom</i> ”	<i>Tom</i> (79%) <i>Hilsen Tom</i> (0%)
Tora	« <i>hei</i> or I go straight to the point»	<i>Hei</i> (N), (95%) 36% of emails without an opening	«I end with <i>med vennlig hilsen</i> »	<i>Beste hilsen</i> in e-signature (97%)

Table 4: Preferred email opening and closing formulae based on interview data and content analysis of the email discourses

4 The informant uses the term ‘nicety’ to describe utterances such as «have a nice day», “enjoy your weekend”, etc.

Table 4 further contains excerpts of the interviews where they answered the question “How do you open/close an email?” The informants had no problems answering this question, and the content analysis shows that they are mostly right. Thus, if we compare the interviewees’ answers to the linguistic content analysis, we find that only two of the answers, those of Kari and Tora, are not well supported by the content analysis. Kari uses *mvh* as much as *hilsen* or *beste hilsen*. Tora had changed workplace at the time of the interview and the new work environment may have affected her answer. Julia is right when she says that she has stopped using *heisann*. There is no *heisann* registered after 2015.

The percentage in Table 4 marks the distribution of specific openings/closings in each informant’s emails relative to the total number of that informant’s linguistic opening or closing items (i.e. lack of opening/closing not counted). We see that many, but not all the informants, have little variety in openings and closings. This is further elaborated on in Table 5 which displays that, except for Mona, those with the longest experience in administrative work tend to stick to their regular one to two closings even when they write to external recipients. Siv, Klara, Maren, Janne, Kari and Line, who have worked less than 10 years in administrative work, have more variety. ‘In’ stands for internal emails and ‘ex’ means external emails. The informants are ordered according to years of experience from the least experienced to the left to the most experienced to the right.

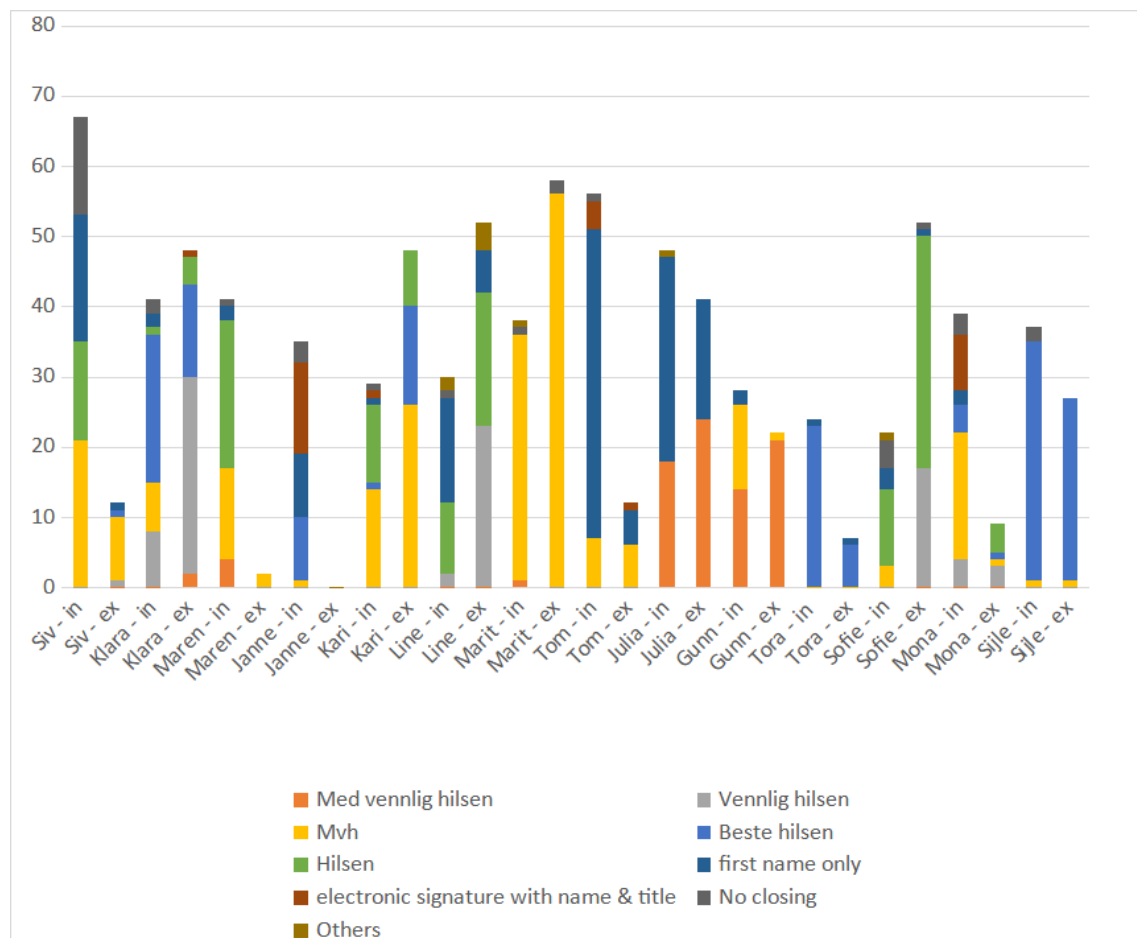


Table 5: Closings in internal and external emails.

Thus, the linguistic content analysis of the email data supports the informants’ own claims about habitual use, but the question remains as to what it is motivated by.

Interview question number 6 contains two open questions: “How do you find writing workplace emails? What considerations do you do?” in the hope that the informants would volunteer some explanations of what motivated their linguistic choices. Since they rarely gave any explanations (see a few comments in table 4), the informants were specifically asked (interview question 8) to comment on how the closing formulae *hilsen* [greeting], *beste hilsen* [best greeting], and *mvh* (abbreviation of *med vennlig hilsen*) vary in terms of formality. The informants, who were shown by the content analysis to use *mvh*, considered this to be the immediate equivalent of *med vennlig hilsen*, a formal closing formula, and, therefore, the one best suited for a workplace email. Similarly, those who used *beste hilsen* found it friendly, nice, warm and personal and, therefore, suitable for workplace emails. On the other hand, the five informants who, according to the content analysis, did not use *beste hilsen*, called it old-fashioned and foreign. Similarly, the six informants who rarely use *mvh* assessed it to be impersonal, sloppy, dry, clumsy and strange.

Those who use <i>mvh</i>		Those who use <i>beste hilsen</i>	
Mona	“People read <i>mvh</i> as the formal <i>med vennlig hilsen</i> [...] I am formal. We are the administration, it is important to be clear.”	Kari	“I saw a colleague use this form and thought it was really <i>koselig</i> ‘cosy, nice’. I then decided to start using it myself”
Marit	“In business relations, I try to be correct, formal, polite and avoid being too direct.”	Silje	“I try to be personal to avoid emails that look like they come off an assembly line. <i>Beste hilsen</i> is an invitation to <i>hyggelig</i> ‘nice, friendly’ cooperation.”
Siv	“I am formal when I write on behalf of the department.”	Silje	“I use <i>beste hilsen</i> because it is <i>hyggeligere</i> ‘nicer, friendlier’, both because it comes naturally to me and because I want to get a positive response to my emails.”
Maren	“I write on behalf of the institution. I use the formal <i>mvh</i> to people I only communicate with via email.”	Janne	“I prefer this because it is <i>hyggeligere</i> ‘nicer’. <i>Beste hilsen</i> shows goodwill”

Table 6: The informants’ motivations for using *mvh* and *beste hilsen*.

The next section discusses these findings in light of the research questions.

6. Discussion

Due to Norwegian loss of normative rules of formality and the egalitarian social fabric, Rygg (2017) found that Norwegians born before 1960 missed not being able to use the already established and, in their views, more formal greetings anymore. The administrative workers in this study, who are born after 1960, do not seem to mind if they only have one linguistic item (*hei*) at their disposal, and use it both with a formal and an informal intent. In order to provide nuance, the choice of punctuation mark seems to be a conscious and consistent choice. The informants Line and, occasionally, Tom are the only ones who use the opening recommended by the Norwegian Language Council: *Hei, N* [*hei* + comma + name]. However, they do not refer to the Language Council when they explain their choices, but rather to what they learned as children to be the correct orthographic rule, namely that an interjection such as the ‘*hei*’ should be followed by a comma. In the present study, the more common use is a comma after the name as in *Hei Lars*, [*hei*+ name+ comma]. If we again consider Table 4, we see that Janne explains her choice of comma as something that adds formality to the greeting, and Silje uses an exclamation mark because it adds “a positive atmosphere”. The choice of adding a name to the greeting is something that the respondents also had thoughts about, like Siv, who says: “I try to add the name to the greeting because it is *hyggelig* ‘nice, friendly’”. Waldvogel (2007) argues that companies develop their own email culture. *Hei N*, and *Mvh* could have been considered a workplace norm if not for the fact that they were not used or even liked by everyone (see Table 6). Some said that they had started to use an opening/closing formula after seeing that colleagues use them. However, among the 29

opening salutations and 19 closing valedictions registered in the corpus, there was so little commonality that it made it counterproductive to show the overall distribution of one item relative to the others in terms of percentages. For instance, opening salutations such as *heisann* and *gode kolleger* are used with a high frequency of occurrence by single individuals, but not by anyone else in the corpus.

Earlier studies have found that opening salutations and closing valediction in email corpora vary according to various factors such the email's linguistic context (McKeown/Zhang 2015; Pérez Sabater et al. 2008) and the relationship between the correspondents (Sherblom 1988; Bou-Franch 2011; McKeown/Zhang 2015). Thus, the first research question targeted the degree of individual variation in the use of openings and closings. The analysis found that there was a clear tendency to use the same formulae repeatedly, regardless of recipients or context. This was especially true for those who had worked in administrative work for more than ten years (Table 5). Following McKeown/Zhang (2015), we may anticipate that their choices were unconscious and that their answers would deviate from what a content analysis of their email discourses would reveal, but this was not the case. Thus, the answer to research question 2 is that they seem to make conscious choices. McKeown/Zhang (2015) suspected habitual use in closings. The current study detected it in openings too.

The aim of the interviews was to gauge the informants' level of awareness concerning the choice of email greetings and valedictions. Therefore, the informants were asked how they open and close an email, but not explicitly why, in order to see if they would volunteer information to research question 3: "If their choices are conscious, what motivational factors are they guided by?" The fact that few elaborated on why they preferred certain formulae suggests that they had not considered the motivation behind their choices. McKeown/Zhang (2015) argue that the social distance between the correspondents trigger formal greetings and sign-offs. Waldvogel (2007), however, found that the relative status of the interlocutors had little effect on the formality of greetings because, similar to Norway, workplace culture in New Zealand is marked by egalitarianism (Smith et al. 2005). None of the informants in the present study said that they think about hierarchical social distance within the organization when writing internal emails, and Table 5 showed that the informants opted for their typical openings and closings also when writing to external recipients. In fact, only 18 of the 387 emails sent to external recipients were signed off with the email sender's full name. However, all external emails ended with an e-signature, which adds to the formality, but as some informants noted, this also has the purpose of providing the recipient with their contact information.

If social hierarchy is not an important motivational factor, then what is? If we again consider Table 6, we find that when the informants were asked to evaluate the three common closing valedictions *mvh*, *beste hilsen* and *hilsen*, they did have strong opinions about which socio-pragmatic concerns each formula represents, and consequently, which one they did or did not prefer. Those who preferred *beste hilsen* did so because they wanted to be personal and warm. Silje explains her choice both as a personality trait: "because it comes naturally to me", and as a strategic decision: "because I want to get a positive response to my emails". Since the administration often sends emails containing requests that depend upon the recipients' compliance, some regard a personal touch the strategically best choice, like Silje, who says: "I try to be personal to avoid emails that look like they come off an assembly line." For those who prefer the closing valediction *mvh*, there are other socio-pragmatic concerns such as to be formal, correct, polite, and avoid being too direct. This is what they find appropriate because they write on behalf of their department or their institution. Bondi (2005) argues that people aim to display their personal or their professional (impersonal) identities in emails. In this study, those who prefer *mvh* do not explain it as a personality trait or an identity, but rather as their professional role when writing emails at work. From the content analysis, we see that they rarely part from their more formal openings and closings even when they write to fellow administrative officers.

The lack of concern for formal social hierarchies found in this study may be the clearest sign of the data being collected in a highly egalitarian society such as Norway (Eriksen 1993). The motivational factors linked to a wish to be personal versus impersonal, however, was also found by Bondi (2005) in a professional Italian setting. When there are no commonly held norms, there is the danger, as seen in Table 6, that the email sender uses a formula such as *beste hilsen* with a warm and personal intent, but the recipient evaluates it negatively as old-fashioned. This is not a uniquely Norwegian problem, but concerns email correspondents, in general, because of the flexibility innate in the email genre. Some, such as for instance Scheyder (2003), try to remedy this by collecting authentic data (from the USA) in order to provide teachers with guidelines on how to teach professional email communication. However, absence of guidelines provides opportunities to express one's personal voice as formal or informal, personal or impersonal. The informants in this study did not seem to mind having this freedom. It could be because they are used to the linguistic freedom of an egalitarian society, or there could be the more general reason, that they belong to a generation of email users where formal rules are more flexible. We encourage similar studies from societies where hierarchical distance is larger than in Norway to explore this further. The absence of prescribed norms result in people making their own rules. However, as a result, expressions of (in)formality and (im)personality end up depending on the sender's subjective interpretations of chosen greetings, which, one must expect, are interpreted equally subjectively by the recipients.

7. Summary and Limitations

This study has found that there is consistency in the informants' opening and closing formulae in workplace emails. The informants are aware of their habits, but may not consciously know why. The analysis found the need to be professionally impersonal versus personal to be an important motivation guiding the choice of openings and closings. However, the informants' perception of which linguistic items represent these motivations depends on individual interpretations rather than on commonly held views. This study is from one workplace only. Other workplaces, even within administrative work, might show different results when it comes to linguistic choices of openings and closings.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

1 Age

2 Education

3 Time spent in administrative work

4 Do you think of yourself as someone with a leadership position when you write emails?

5 Have you ever been taught how to write formal emails or other types of formal correspondence?

6 How do you find writing workplace emails? What considerations do you do?

7 How do you open/close an email?

8 What do you think of these closings in terms of formality?

8.a *Mvh, Kari*

8.b *Beste hilsen Kari*

8.c *Hilsen Kari*